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SIPDIS

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DEPT PLEASE PASS TO DRL FOR EBARKS-RUGGLES/JLIEBERMAN AND
NEA/ARP FOR RJACHIM/SRAMESH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/28/2027

TAGS: PHUM PGOV KISL SA

SUBJECT: SAUDI HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS DISCUSS PROGRESS
WITH DRL DAS; SAY SAG SERIOUS ABOUT TIP

Classified By: Pol Counselor David Rundell for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. During her June 4 - 7, 2007 to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) Erica Barks-Ruggles met with representatives of the Human Rights Commission (HRC) and National Society for Human Rights (NSHR), who conveyed that they are cooperating in addressing human rights issues in the Kingdom. However, the SAG has made no progress on the law relating to non-governmental organizations (NGO). NSHR issued in May its first human rights report, which it described as an independent assessment of the SAG's compliance with international human rights protocols. Both organizations acknowledged the Kingdom's ongoing problems relating to trafficking in persons (TIP), agreeing that the SAG takes this issue seriously. END SUMMARY.

HRC

¶2. (C) During her June 4 - 7, 2007 to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, DRL DAS Erica Barks-Ruggles met with HRC Chairman Turki al-Sudairy, who told her that Commission and NSHR had formed a joint committee. He added that the HRC works with many ministries and has a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Ministry of Defense. Additionally, the HRC liaises with the Red Crescent Society and has agreed to provide training on human rights to the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Al-Sudairy said the HRC receives two to three cases a day, many involving family disputes, and has resolved approximately 50 percent of them.

¶3. (C) The HRC indicated that it will embark on a training and development program for its board members and staff as a result of a MOU it signed with the UN's Institute for Training and Research. This program will include two weeks of training in Riyadh followed by one week of training in Geneva. It will cover a range of subjects, including TIP, women's rights, and children's issues. HRC will then provide human rights training to schools, universities, and the police. HRC Director General of International Organizations and Relations Abdul Aziz al-Henaidy said the HRC has developed a plan to increase human rights awareness in schools and mosques, although he emphasized that this program will be time and resource intensive.

NSHR

¶4. (C) NSHR Deputy Chairman Mufleh al-Khatani said his organization provides advice to the SAG and identifies international agreements that the SAG should implement, as

well as those it cannot because they contradict Shari'a. He emphasized that only those components of agreements that contradict Shari'a should not be implemented. He noted that the NSHR Annual Report released in the middle of May 2007 is the first human rights survey issued by a Saudi "NGO." (NOTE: The NSHR is not independent of the SAG; therefore, cannot technically be classified as an NGO. END NOTE.) Al-Khatani said the report reviews SAG compliance with international agreements and identifies problem areas. He claimed that the NSHR is independent of the SAG, saying the report criticizes parts of the Government and makes recommendations to promote human rights. Khatani described the NSHR report as objective and neutral, emphasizing that it strictly represents NSHR's views.

TIP

¶5. (C) Al-Khatani complained that reports by the USG and international NGOs negatively impact the work of the NSHR when they only voice criticism of the SAG. However, such reports have a positive impact, he said, when they are objective and report on progress in addition to criticizing the SAG. Al-Khatani added that labeling Saudi Arabia as a "country of particular concern" in terms of religious freedom and TIP are not helpful and frustrate SAG decision makers. He also said that these decision makers then think that it is pointless to arrange visits by USG officials when the resulting reports fail to say anything positive or refer to progress made. He said the NSHR has compared the Kingdom to other countries and found that countries with worse records are rated as better. He expressed concern that the SAG would be less cooperative in the future because of what he described as the lack of objectivity and unbalanced nature of these reports.

¶6. (C) Barks-Ruggles told al-Khatani that DRL has encouraged Ambassador-at-Large and Director of the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons Dr. Mark Lagon to visit Saudi Arabia, as well as encouraging his attendance at the next meeting of the Strategic Dialogue's Human Development Working Group (HDWG). She pointed out that the 2006 TIP report did outline some SAG efforts against prostitution, selling and trafficking children, and employers who fail to pay employees, wages.

¶7. (C) Al-Khatani agreed that a visit to the Kingdom by Ambassador Lagon would be very helpful, adding that the NSHR participated in a workshop on TIP at the MFA's Diplomatic Institute in early May. He mentioned the attendance of an American professor (NFI), who stated that most types of TIP do not exist in the Kingdom. According to al-Khatani, this professor classified these issues in the context of Saudi Arabia as "labor problems." Al-Khatani continued that the Council of Ministers recently issued a new decree calling for the abolishment of the work visa sponsorship system but said no real changes have been made to date. He pointed out the difficulty of monitoring the treatment of foreign domestic workers due to the inability of officials to access private homes, adding that the NSHR will study the TIP situation to determine whether the USG can provide any technical assistance

¶8. (C) During the meeting with HRC, Chairman al-Sudairy also acknowledged the ongoing problems with TIP and emphasized that the SAG is dealing directly with this issue. He added that the Ministry of Labor (MOL) plans to open more labor courts. Al-Sudairy noted that he has discussed TIP with representatives from the Indian and Pakistani embassies, pointing out that the SAG signed an agreement with the Government of Yemen regarding trafficking of children. He also said the Ministry of Social Affairs has shelters that provide food and medicine for third country nationals who have fled abusive employers, adding that the SAG pays to transport individuals to their home countries. He claimed that less than half of one percent of foreign workers in the Kingdom experience TIP-related problems.

ALLEGATIONS OF MISTREATMENT

¶9. (C) There were also complaints about Guantanamo Bay detainees. NSHR's al-Khatani said that the Society works with a committee of families of GTMO detainees. This committee is concerned about the number of suicides and attempted suicides, he said, and the committee was disappointed that the USG released an Australian detainee to serve his time in Australia, but has not done the same for Saudis. He said family members feel that nothing will be settled with regard to the remaining detainees. Barks-Ruggles pointed out that the Australian had been tried and convicted in a military commission and that this was not analogous to any of the Saudi cases as no Saudi citizens have yet been tried.

¶10. (C) HRC's al-Henaidy also said there are problems regarding Saudi detainees at Guantanamo Bay but did not specify any concerns in detail. He also complained about mistreatment of Saudi citizens at points of entry to the U.S. He pointed out that many Saudis are choosing not to study in the U.S. -- even though a U.S. education is preferred -- because they are concerned about mistreatment by U.S. authorities. It was suggested that Saudi students be provided with pamphlets in Arabic explaining U.S. laws and warning them about potential problems. Barks-Ruggles outlined the study abroad seminars that Post has instituted and the detailed information being given regarding entry requirements and travel to the U.S. for all Saudi students leaving this fall on scholarships to the U.S. She emphasized the importance of the SAG urging students to attend these seminars before traveling and asked the HRC to be in frequent contact with the Embassy and Ministry of Higher Education on this issue.

NGO LAW

¶11. (C) Al-Khatani said that the draft NGO law is still being considered by the Majlis al-Shoura and has been referred back to committee, explaining that some NSHR and Shoura Council members criticized an earlier version of the draft law, which is why the SAG decided to revise it. He said he hopes the law will allow NGOs to work independently and efficiently but predicted it would not be ready for more thorough examination for some months.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) The issuance of a report on human rights is an important and interesting step in the development of accountability mechanisms on human rights (septel). While not "independent," the fact that there is a perceived need for such a report is a good sign that the SAG and the NSHR are beginning to take some steps towards public accountability and openness about some human rights issues. Although discussions with the HRC have always been open and friendly, it is clear that this organization is still trying to address its administrative and internal procedures. Hence, it will be some time before the HRC can effectively work with SAG ministries to systematically address human rights issues. END COMMENT.

¶13. (U) This cable has been cleared by DAS Barks-Ruggles.
FRAKER